

**Interview with Michael B. Ross, MD, physician assigned to USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5). Participated in Operation Frequent Wind, April 1975. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 14 November 2008.**

**Where are you from?**

I was born in Bay Shore, NY, out on Long Island.

**I'm from Babylon.**

Really? That's just one train stop in between!

**Were you raised in Bay Shore?**

Until age 11 and at that point the family moved to northeast Ohio. I lived there until I went away to college and medical school.

**Where did you go to school?**

I went to Western Reserve University, which is now Case Western or just Case University in Cleveland. And then I went to the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond.

**When did you join the Navy and how did that happen?**

My father was Navy during World War II. He was actually in an exempt profession in the power industry. The story was that he put up a little fuss and was able to get in. I always had a prejudice or a leaning toward the Navy. During Vietnam, I chose to enlist rather than be drafted. That way I could choose branch of service. I think it was early in my second year of medical school or late in the first year that I enlisted.

**What was the process at that time?**

I think I simply went to talk to one of the recruiting offices and was referred to someone who handled medical personnel. The whole process was fairly smooth. I do remember going for a physical exam and the whole line sort of grinding to a halt when there was one young gentleman there who was taking estrogen injections and was creating a bit of a fuss about the examination. But other than that things went smoothly.

**Was there any sort of orientation? Did you go to Newport?**

I was sworn in there at some local office. Initially I had a deferment to study oncology, which would have allowed me to finish medical school, 3 years of residency, and 2 years of fellowship. For a number of reasons, including girlfriend problems and wanting to rethink that career, I told the detailers that I would like to go in at the end of the second year of residency. In fact, I actually made a trip up to Washington to BUMED and spoke to the detailers there, who weren't particularly pleased with someone who was changing plans. I was single, of course, and they said I could either go to the Atlantic aboard ship or the Pacific with the Marines. I think I said, "Let's try the Pacific."

I then received orders and took a commercial flight to Camp Pendleton, where we had orientation that lasted 1 week.

**What year was this?**

This was 1973. I had already been commissioned and had been inactive for 3 or 4 years.

**What was that 1-week orientation at Pendleton like? What did they teach you?**

Not a whole lot. They tried to teach us which end of a gun the bullet comes out, I think. There were eight of us physicians there. We also were able to purchase a single uniform. I remember being surrounded by a fair number of Marines. I remember one instance in which a fly had been flying around and landed on our table. I picked up a knife and was fortunate enough to hit the fly and chop it right in half, to which I received a round of applause from the Marines.

Then after that 1 week, we took a plane to Okinawa. It was a DC-8, one long tube of three and three seating. I think it went from California to Hawaii and stopped at Wake or Midway. Okinawa was fogged in so we went to Taiwan, where they dropped through a very low cloud bank to drop it on the runway pretty hard. Once the weather cleared, they flew us up to Okinawa.

**How long were you there?**

That was from '73 to '74.

**Where were you stationed?**

The furthest north camp--Camp Schwab. Beyond that it was dirt road, tattooed women in the jungle. I can only imagine what it looks like now but it was fairly primitive then. It was there I met the Navy chaplain who subsequently married my wife and me. He had gotten orders to go to Okinawa and was unable to attend the funeral of his father. He came in seeking anti-anxiety medication. We sat and talked a bit. I told him he needed to go down to the beach and have a good cry. He followed that advice and we have been fast friends ever since.

**So you played the role of chaplain to the chaplain.**

That's right. But oncologists are half doctor, half priest anyway. And I still keep in touch with him.

**Where did you go from Camp Schwab?**

I think I was well respected by the Marines while I was there. And I had a lot of respect for them, too. Their officer was fairly erudite and well read. And because of a good performance report, I was assigned to the Seventh Fleet flag, the *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5).

In early '74 the Marines traveled to Australia for amphibious operations. On the way back, we stopped at Subic Bay in the Philippines. Knowing I had orders to *Oklahoma City*, and still not really understanding the military system all that well, I stayed on the ship and rode back to Okinawa while the Marines stayed in the Philippines. When I walked into the division doctor's office. He said, "You're AWOL. Where have you been?"

I presented him a gift I brought for him from Australia. I knew he was something of a rock hound and I purchased a piece of stone with an opal in it so he could polish it himself. He was so thrilled he said, "Don't worry." So nothing ever came of that incident.

**When you say you were on the ship, what ship are you referring to, the *Oklahoma City*?**

No. The amphibious carrier with the Marines. I rode from the Philippines back to Okinawa, thinking I was supposed to go back to Okinawa before I reported to Japan. But everything worked out okay.

**Were did you go from there?**

I went to the *Oklahoma City*. Initially, the ship was in dry dock there undergoing so work. I then made a variety of cruises all over the Pacific.

**What was your role at this point?**

I was a general medical officer without specialty. In essence, I was head of the medical department. I had an individual room way up under the fo'c's'le on one side. In heavy seas, it was quite a ride but I enjoyed it.

**What kind of medical department did you have aboard as far as personnel?**

There were two chiefs and a number of corpsmen. The master chief was very, very good and knew how to lead the men. I had very little role other than to ride and be there for an emergency. There were only a few times that we had any significant medical issues that required attention. Most of it was minor stuff. Of course, being at Subic Bay, there was some venereal disease to treat.

**So it's getting toward the spring of 1975 and not very good things are going on in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese are pushing south and the South Vietnamese are doing a good job defending themselves. Did you know what was going on there or was all this somewhat tangential to your normal activities?**

I don't think we knew as much detail, certainly comparable to what's available to people today. The ship had satellite communication for the admiral and that's why it served as the flagship at that time. But I don't we really knew how bad things were. When things really started to fall apart it was obvious that there was some urgency because we hightailed it out of Yokosuka. I was told that we had to certify the 6-inch gun, which hadn't been done for awhile. We headed for the Philippines. I think it was a very brief stop at Subic. We went to a hillside and fired the guns into the hillside. I recall the little canoes coming out to pick up the brass shell casings.

Then we steamed fairly rapidly down to Vietnam. We were told that the Viet Cong had captured the large 155mm guns that the army had left behind. We were there to duel with them if that's what it came to. Of course, nothing like that ever happened.

**Did you see any of the huge numbers of South Vietnamese helicopters carrying escaping refugees?**

I was actually on the bridge when the first helicopters came out. And I recall the captain or the executive officer of the watch saying that we had received communications from Washington about saving the air frames because these were valuable. Our ship had a tiny helo deck on the back. And as the first helicopter came in carrying 25 or 30 people who ran off with more waiting, the XO shrugged and said, "Push it overboard."

That's what happened. You made me remember the name of the command ship--the *Blue Ridge*. And that was within sight. I remember seeing two helicopters land at the same time because they thought that was an aircraft carrier. We were close enough to actually see the explosion of fiberglass when the blades interacted. It was an impressive sight. There was also at least one helo that crashed into the sea with no survivors.

But once all that initial stuff happened, I went to the fantail and then down to the medical department because we had a few injured. I recall one man by the name of Tran Chinh, who was an F-4 Phantom pilot for the Vietnamese air force. He told me he had thousands of hours and had never been injured. Now he had a large gash on his leg that he had sustained getting either in or out of the helicopter because they had removed the doors to get more people in. And that got sewn up and bandaged. There were no other serious injuries among the people we picked up. Tran Chinh eventually settled in Houston, where and his wife had a convenience store. And I have traded Christmas season cards with him ever since.

**So you didn't see many of these refugees?**

I can't recall the number but I think we picked up several hundred on our ship alone. I was impressed how well they did in landing those helos. The seas were not heavy. The chop was light. Our pilots would come in and adjust, then come down. These Vietnamese pilots just slapped them right on the deck.

**These Vietnamese pilots had never flown over water before, certainly not over open ocean.**

I would assume that was the case. And, of course, we picked up military, men, women, and a few children, as I recall. And that went on for the first day or so. Subsequent to that, we saw an overturned boat that had no survivors. It was floating upside down. We sank it with machine gun fire just to prevent it from being a hazard to navigation.

I don't remember remember where we took those people. I assume we took them to the Philippines.

**Many of them ended up in Subic. And then they were only allowed to stay there for a short time, just days, I think. Marcos was a bit squeamish about offending the North Vietnamese. They put them on chartered ships and took them to Guam.**

When we got back to Japan--and I made a comment to the admiral that I would be happy to help with refugee care there. He apparently informed the captain. However it happened, I was put aboard one of those little Lear jets and flown to the Philippines and spent about 2 ½ weeks there working at an island in the middle of Subic Bay treating refugees.

**What condition were they in?**

Generally in reasonably good condition. We had a number of births there. As soon as we had a birth, they were ferried over to the military hospital. There was a birth in the early morning hours. We took the mother and the child to the hospital. I wandered through administration on the way back looking for a ride back to the island. And there, sitting in the corner, was a Vietnamese girl quietly sobbing. I asked her what was the matter. She was put on one of the ships by her husband, she and her two children. The husband was in the Vietnamese navy. She was put on some sort of boat and he went back to his ship. At sea, in these very crowded conditions, one of the two children died and was thrown overboard. The second baby became ill and died at the military hospital. So there she was, no husband, two dead children, and didn't speak the language. I told her that I would take care of this.

I took her back to the island where I had made contacts with a number of Vietnamese nuns. I got one of them by the name of Anna to sit with this lady and we told her that her baby would be buried with all the American heroes at the military cemetery but that no, she could not

go there. We provided the necessary counsel and comfort and also made special effort to find her husband. We found him on Guam so she was pushed up the line and flew her to Guam. I later learned that this couple was adopted by a family in California and she eventually settled in Cambria, CA, which is near the Hearst Castle, halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Some years later, I was going to a medical convention in San Francisco and made arrangements to visit her. We also traded Christmas cards for many years. Her husband, I think, was an emotional wreck and never amounted to anything. She had three more children by him and they all had good educations and had gone to college. So she had something of the American dream. For years I corresponded with her. For the last 5 years she has not answered my cards, although I can Google her name or look it up on White Pages. com. That name still appears in Cambria, CA.

**And the husband is now deceased?**

I don't know. I don't think he ever achieved anything. I think he was in such shock with all the loss and trauma, that he couldn't recover emotionally and be much support. She was the support for the family.

**Did you take care of other refugees there?**

All sorts of conditions, mostly minor illnesses, sick call. I forget who was in command but there were a number of physicians working and living and sleeping out on Grande Island in the middle of Subic Bay. Subsequently, when I returned to the ship, I received a letter of appreciation, which is on my bookshelf here. It was presented to me by the captain of the *Oklahoma City*. Sometimes I ask why that wasn't a letter of commendation that would go in my military record. In any event, it was a good deed. Lots of good memories.

**After your duty aboard the ship and the subsequent activity, how long did you remain in the Navy?**

For 4 more years. If I had the maturity or experience that I have now, I might not have bucked the captain a few times and stayed longer. The silly captain tried to put me and the dentist on the watch list--not on the bridge--he wanted to have medical watch. I'm on 24/7, 365 anyway. Why am I on the watch list? I told him that was ridiculous and wouldn't do it. So he decided he didn't want me on his ship anymore. I was going to rotate off anyway.

I then went to a submarine tender on the East Coast, the *Orion* (AS-18). It's interesting. My father served on AS-17.

After that, I spoke to the detailers and told them I needed to go back and finish my medicine residency. Then they moved me to Little Creek and I applied to do internal residency at Portsmouth Naval Hospital. I actually applied to start all over again because I had spent 3 or 4 years away from internal medicine.

I was accepted for that. Come March, I received a phone call one day that said they had a fellow who just couldn't handle it, was having chest pain, and I was to show up there next week. I was to finish 3 or 4 months of the first year of residency and then I'd be a second-year resident. That's how that happened.

It was at Portsmouth that I met my wife on SOQ, Sick Officers' Quarters. I went up to do a consult on someone and there was this cute nurse. We met about a week or 10 days after she had augmented to regular Navy from reserve. It was kind of a whirlwind courtship. She was going to be transferred. I asked our chief of medicine if I could go to Bethesda. I was supposed

to be assistant chief of medicine. He said yes but really didn't want me to leave. He talked to the hospital commander, who was an admiral. I can only imagine what the detailers now thought. Well, they kept us together but sent us to Cherry Point, NC, where there was very little internal medicine to do. That's the time there was a real downturn in military financing after Vietnam. We elected at that point to leave. We were both in our 30s. My wife got pregnant and got out and I went on to a fellowship at M.D. Anderson and remained in the inactive reserve. No one ever told me that I could collect retirement points just for doing continuing education.

When I finished at M.D. Anderson, I spent 3 years in the Rio Grande Valley. Then we moved to Fort Worth and was in practice by myself for 7 or 8 years. I would take one Sunday a month off. Developing a practice, you don't get much vacation time.

When Desert Storm came around we were concerned that we would both recalled, but to their credit they knew that an individual in practice . . . it would be a hardship on them.

After Desert Storm the Navy said that I'd either have to active or get out. There was really no way I could take a weekend a month and 2 weeks in the summer. But I had about 17 or 18 years total by then. So they told me they'd retire me. They'd give me retirements without benefits. On paper I'm USNR retired but I don't have any commissary privileges or anything like that.

At this point, you only remember the good things; you don't remember the trials and tribulations and the errors.

**So you've been in practice in internal medicine?**

And oncology. Essentially, it's a pure cancer and leukemia practice. There are now 18 physicians in this group and I'm the old man. I'm sort of easing out and looking back at these memories.

**Do you ever think about that time in Vietnam very much any more?**

Occasionally. Not specifically that episode at the end of the war. Anna, the little Vietnamese nun I again met in California. She wanted to marry me and kept in touch. When my wife and I were in North Carolina at Cherry Point, she actually visited to make sure that what she was being told was correct, that I had a pregnant wife.

**You usually don't see too many married nuns these days.**

No.

**So she was willing to leave the order?**

Apparently. I'm not sure but what would have happened. She was a darling, caring young woman. She took wonderful care of the refugees that were there. I don't have any real contact with the refugee community as such. Sometimes I have patients who will bring a parent in who came from Cambodia or Vietnam.

My wife and I sometimes wonder what would have happened if we had both stayed in the Navy. We both have a lot of good memories.